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How to Listen When Someone You Know Discloses Sexual Harassment or Assault

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This post is based on a longer article by Dr. Jennifer J. Freyd (Professor of Psychology, University of Oregon)

Every day now in the news, we learn of various actions taken by those facing allegations of sexual assault and harassment. One set of actions has to do with their reported sexual harassment and/or assaults. Another set of actions has to do with how they respond when accused. Both types of action are crucially important. A good response can at least do some good (sincere apologies can be healing). But a bad response not only exacerbates the harm of the first injury, it also inflicts new injury, and does so in ways that are usually public and ongoing (well past the media moving on).

It is very important to be a good listener when a friend or loved one discloses a difficult or upsetting experience like sexual assault or harassment. We know that respectful, compassionate, attentive, and authentic listening can be healing, while a controlling, blaming, and/or invalidating response can cause harm.

1. Do Not "DARVO" and Call It Out When You See It

DARVO stands for "**Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender.**" The perpetrator or offender may:

- Deny the behavior,
- Attack the individual doing the confronting, and
- Reverse the roles of Victim and Offender.

DARVO is a particularly pernicious response to disclosure and can cause harm. For more on DARVO see this page.

2. Be a Well-Intentioned and Respectful Listener

Many people want to respond well to a disclosure but may not know how. Here are some guidelines to help people and institutions respond well to disclosures of violence and distressing events. These suggestions are drawn from research findings[1]

- Respect the survivor's autonomy and[2] strengths
- Validate the survivor and indicate that the responsibility for the violence is with the perpetrator(s)
- Stay engaged and focused on the survivor's needs and validate the survivor's strengths
- When it is possible and appropriate, sincerely apologize
- Do *not* invalidate, blame or pathologize the survivor
- Do *not* take away the survivor's autonomy

3. Be a Compassionate Listener[2]

These suggestions are drawn from instructions that address listening skills in the moment.

First, it is important to use attentive body language.

- Do not make inappropriate facial expressions (e.g., smiling when someone is discussing a sad topic, rolling your eyes, raising your eyebrows when hearing how someone coped) and do not move your body too much (e.g., excessive fidgeting, playing with your cell phone).

- Do sit in a posture (e.g., leaning forward or upright) and use gestures that convey engagement (e.g., nodding).

- Do maintain consistent, not constant or darting, eye contact (look directly at the person for brief periods of 3-6 seconds, then look away briefly before reconnecting).

Second, it is important to use verbal skills that encourage the speaker to continue.

- Do *not* change the topic or ask questions that are off-topic. This may seem like a way to decrease your anxiety or make the other person more comfortable, but it often has the opposite effect.

- *Do* allow silence and convey that you are listening by using encouraging words like “hmmm” and “uh-huh” periodically.

- *Do* state/name/reflect back the emotion being described. It might also help you to imagine yourself in the speaker’s place and look at the situation from his/her perspective.

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Examples:

“Wow – sounds like it was scary for you.”

“It seems like you feel really sad about that.”

“I feel like that must’ve made you angry.”

- *Do* ask questions if you are confused, and try to ask questions that require more than one word.

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Instead of:

“Was that scary?”

“Do you mean it wasn’t that bad?”

Ask questions like:

“Could you tell me a little bit more about that?”

“What was that like for you?”

“What do you mean when you say _____?”

Third, it is important to use words in a way that convey support.

- Do *not* reassure the person in a way that might minimize their experience

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Examples:

“That happened so long ago, maybe it would help to try move on.”

“It’s not worth the energy to keep thinking about it.”

“Don’t be scared.”

- Do *not* make judgments or evaluations about their responses or decisions

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Examples:

“Couldn’t you do/say _____ instead?”

“I don’t think you should worry about it anymore.”

“I think it’d be better for you to _____.”

“Why don’t you _____?”

- *Do* validate the person’s emotions in a genuine tone

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(Examples: “If that happened to me, I can imagine I’d feel really overwhelmed too.” “Given that experience, it makes sense you’d feel/say/do _____.” “I think many people with that experience would have felt similarly.”)

- *Do* point out the person’s strengths

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Examples:

“I’m amazed at how much courage that took.”

“You’ve done a great job at keeping everything in perspective.”

“I really admire your strength.”

“I’m impressed with how you’ve dealt with this.”

- *Do* focus on their experience rather than your own and only give advice when it is requested.

When family and friends listen with respect and compassion they can help survivors on their paths to healing. To receive confidential support following a sexual assault, please contact the RAINN Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-HOPE (4673).

Biography:

Jennifer J. Freyd, PhD, is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Oregon. She received her PhD in Psychology from Stanford University. Freyd directs a laboratory investigating the impact of interpersonal and institutional trauma on mental and physical health, behavior, and society. The author or coauthor of 200 articles, Freyd is also the author of the Harvard Press award-winning book *Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse*. Her book *Blind to Betrayal*, co-authored with Pamela J. Birrell, was published in 2013, with seven additional translations. In 2014, Freyd was invited two times to the U.S. White House due to her research on sexual assault and institutional betrayal. Freyd has received numerous awards including being named a John Simon Guggenheim Fellow and an Erskine Fellow at The University of Canterbury in New Zealand, and a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. In April 2016, Freyd was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Society for the Study of Trauma & Dissociation. Freyd currently serves as the Editor of *The Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*. You can follow Dr. Freyd on Twitter at @jjforegon.

References:

[1]For example, Ullman, S. E., & Peter-Hagene, L. (2014). Social reactions to sexual assault disclosure, coping, perceived control, and PTSD symptoms in sexual assault victims. J. Community Psychology, 42: 495-508. doi: 10.1002/jcop.21624. Also these suggestions are drawn from Freyd & Birrell (2013), Blind to Betrayal.

[2]These instructions were used in a study by: Foynes, M.M., & Freyd, J.J. (2011). The impact of skills training on responses to the disclosure of mistreatment. Psychology of Violence, 1, 66-77. The particular wording of these instructions was designed to match a control condition in our study. (See http://dynamic.uoregon.edu/jjf/disclosure for the specific experimental and control materials).

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